DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 272 797 CG 019 280

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TITLE Anger: A Feminist Perspective.
PUB DATE Aug 86
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (94th, Washington, DC, August 22-26, 1986).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Aggression; *Anger; *Change Strategies; *Feminism; *Phenomenology; *Research Problems; *Social Change; Social Control

ABSTRACT

Research in the area of anger has traditionally been pursued from a reductionist and empiricist perspective and has taken place mainly on an individual level. The reductionist approach defines anger as an experience with physiological, cognitive, and behavioral components which can be defined and assessed. This approach ignores the phenomenology of the anger expeience, the social context of anger, and anger expression as an instrument for social change. The feminist perspective emphasizes the importance of the individual experience and thus values a phenomenological approach to assessment. The relationship between anger and aggression has proceeded in an empirical fashion with variables and procedures that can be manipulated in the laboratory forming the basis for the accumulating body of information. Several problems arise from the laboratory approach which might be remedied if researchers studied anger under real-life circumstances or emulated real-life conditions in their research. Recent research has explored the means to control anger while ignoring an important aspect of the anger experience; namely, anger expressed by oppressed groups in the context of movements for change (women's liberation, civil rights). The failure of social scientists to recognize the anger of disenfranchised groups in the context of social movements has serious ramifications. The feminist perspective allows an examination of the broader social context in which anger arises and the validation of the anger experience as a sometimes justifiable response to social-political conditions. (NB)

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Anger: A Feminist Perspective[1]

Mary Kay Biaggio

Research in the area of anger has traditionally been pursued in the context of the existing scientific paradigm, that is, from a reductionist and empiricist perspective. These traditional modes of inquiry and the prevailing conceptualizations of the problem have shaped the nature and direction of the research on anger and on a related topic, aggression. Further, the traditional research approach has been influenced by the social-political context in which psychological research is embedded. For anger, this means that the analysis has taken place mostly on an individual level, with anger being considered a problem residing within the individual. When broader analyses have considered exogenous factors, they have often arrived at the conclusion that anger is now an outmoded emotion in our modern society. An examination of the research to date will illustrate how the existing paradigm has influenced inquiry into anger and what an alternative feminist perspective has to offer.

Definition and Assessment of Anger

Anger has been defined, for the most part, as an experience with physiological, cognitive, and behavioral components. It has been assumed that anger can be measured by first defining the physiological, psychological (that is, primarily cognitive aspects), and behavioral components of the anger experience, and then by devising techniques to assess these components. This reductionist approach has resulted in a number of difficulties, however, which most researchers have attempted to resolve by resorting to the same techniques that created the problems in the first place. For instance, the three parameters have not been found to intercorrelate to the extent that might be expected (Eysenck, 1975; Martin, 1972). The physiological response typically associated with anger does not constitute a reliable indicator of the emotion since, as Lang (1971, p. 99) has pointed out, "nearly all physiological responses can be generated by a great variety of internal and external stimuli and it seems unlikely that any physiological event could be used in an exact substitutive way as an index of a psychological state." Given this state of affairs, Eysenck (1975, p. 441) concludes that "the evidence suggests that verbal report...is in many ways the preferred method of measuring and indexing states of emotional arousal." Indeed, if we consider the commonsense illustrations of the poker face and feigned emotion phenomena (as practiced by actors), we might conclude that subject report is the single most valid (i.e. phenomenologically accurate) measure

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[1]Biaggio, M. K. (1986, August). Anger: A feminist perspective. In A. Brownell (Chair), Re-visions of psychology: Feminism as a paradigm of scientific inquiry Symposium conducted at American Psychological Association Convention, Wash-

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of emotional experience. However, traditional research has tended to shy away from phenomenological report, correctly noting that such report is more difficult to categorize, but incorrectly assuming that it is not a valid indicator.

Another problem in defining and assessing the psychological component of anger has been understanding the closely related psychological states. Some measures have been proliferated in attempts to measure and thus differentiate between such related states as indirect hostility, negativism, suspicion, irritability, guilt, resentment, state anger, trait anger, and so on and so on, resulting in a confusing array of assessment devices measuring a variety of constructs.

The feminist perspective emphasizes the importance of the individual experience and thus values a phenomenological approach to assessment. This approach concedes that people will report a variety of emotions in conjunction with anger, that is, anger, as any other strong emotional reaction, is not a pure experience. I discovered this several years ago when I utilized a diary report methodology in a research project. Subjects were instructed to report on the provoking incident, their feelings, thoughts, and behavioral responses. They reported a great variety of feelings and, once I developed a system for categorization of these emotional states, I arrived at some interesting results. For instance, when I was able to look at the range of emotions closely associated with anger, I discovered that men and women report different feeling experiences in response to provocation, with women being more likely to report hurt feelings and men being more likely to focus on a sense of annoyance. Of course, this approach has been maligned as unscientific. Several years ago I was discussing a paper of mine with a prominent researcher in the field. In my naivete I enthusiastically brought up the work of a researcher who has utilized personal report in his studies. The prominent researcher explained to me that this was not serious research, that this person and his perspective were not respected in the field.

Anger/Aggression Research and Its Generalizability

Another important line of inquiry has examined the relationship between anger and aggression. Research in this area has proceeded in an empirical fashion, with variables and procedures that can be manipulated in the laboratory forming the basis for the accumulating body of information.

For the most part, research on anger expression and/or aggression has been conducted in the laboratory. There are some obvious differences between laboratory and real-life circumstances that may limit the relevance of this body of research to clinical situations. That is, the provocations employed by experimenters are often arbitrary, artificial, and of short duration. For the most part, real-life incidents are not as transient as most laboratory provocations. While experimentally induced provocations may be of little consequence to the individual, anger over actual events may represent ongoing and quite

significant perturbation. As Fine (1985, p. 168) has noted: "Researchers who write within a traditional psychological paradigm often describe the psychology of the individual 'as if' it could be examined independent of political, economic, and social contexts." This oversight is, I believe, especially problematic for an emotional expression such as anger, which can represent both a reaction to external events as well as a means of acting on the environment.

Self-report data presented by Averill (1982) provide some information on the everyday experience of anger. Averill found that of all the recent incidents reported, 88% involved another person as the target of that anger. Of those persons, 52% were either loved ones or someone known well, 8% were persons known well but disliked, 26% were acquaintances, and only 12% were strangers. Similarly, in an interview study of naturally occurring anger expression, Fitz and Gerstenzang (1978) found that over 70% of all anger occurred with an individual known longer than a year and that screaming arguments and physical violence most typically occurred with someone known over five years. However, most laboratory research employs confederates who are strangers to the subjects.

Quanty (1976) brings up what may be another significant difference between real-life circumstances and demand characteristics of the laboratory setting. That is, in real-life situations there are socialized inhibitions against aggression. Laboratory studies of catharsis deliberately lower restraints against aggression and thus may be seen as representing a reversal of social norms generally prohibiting aggression. Though this research may provide valuable data about violence in the case of lowered restraints in the real world, it may not be generalizable to most actual manifestations of aggression.

The means of counter-aggression in laboratory studies are specified by the researcher, whereas in reality persons have a multitude of choices in response to provocation. This choice factor may itself have great influence on the subject's outlook and the likelihood that he/she will respond aggressively or nonaggressively in such encounters. For example, in real-life instances of provocation by a person with whom the subject has ongoing contact, the provoked individual may well delay retribution in favor of taking time to carefully consider all the options. Along these same lines, studies by Foa and associates (Foa, Turner, & Foa, 1972; Donnenwerth & Foa, 1974) suggest that certain types of aggressive responses tend to elicit particular counterresponses more readily than other counterresponses.

The subject's considerations of future consequences for their actions is usually not a dimension of the designs in which subjects are themselves given the opportunity to express anger or to aggress. Baron (1973) has shown that if a victim threatens a nonangered subject with retaliation in response to aggressive expressions these expressions will be inhibited. In

a study attempting to approximate real-life conditions (Van Egeren, Abelson, & Thornton, 1978), a number of variables were found to influence subsequent adjustment to provocation: guilt-proneness, the reinforcement structure of the interaction, the level of behavioral exploitativeness, and certainty or uncertainty regarding the consequences of the subject's responses. The researchers conclude (p. 537-538) that "(t)he uncertain possibilities of future external conflict (e.g., surrounding the other person's aggression, retaliation, or rejection), as well as internal conflict (e.g., guilt, fear of separation), offers a powerful restraint on the direct expression of anger and resentment. The social power and reinforcement conditions of the relationship may be important parameters."

The above overview highlights some variables that must be considered in real-life occurrences of anger. In essence, traditional research has engaged in what Michele Paludi (1985) has called "context stripping." Research that has considered more contextual or personal variables (e.g. the prospect of retaliation, a tendency to experience guilt over anger, etc.) has demonstrated the salience of these variables. However, when I presented this critique of traditional research in a recently submitted article one of the reviewers commented that "the point made about real world relevance is odd."

The above problems could be remedied if researchers attempted to study anger under real-life circumstances or to emulate real-life conditions in their research. Though this research is admittedly more complex, it has the potential of complementing more controlled research and of thus yielding a richer body of knowledge. Ebbesen, Duncan, & Konecni (1975) did conduct an interesting field study recently. In this study, employees being laid off and employees leaving voluntarily took part in standard exit interviews. They were induced to aggress verbally against either the company, their supervisor, or themselves, or to discuss neutral topics. Questionnaires completed after the interview allowed the researchers to examine the effects of verbal aggression on hostility toward the various targets under very real circumstances. Since this research was conducted with subjects who were experiencing real distress and possibly also anger in response to it, these exit interviews, which were in line with company policy, provided data that was more generalizable to the variety of real-life occurrences of provocation than that of most laboratory research.

The Focus on Control of Anger

Recently an increasing number of researchers and clinicians have explored means to control anger. Obviously, there are some serious problems associated with impulsive and extreme anger reactions, for instance, child abuse and domestic violence. Though this research approach is admittedly a valuable one from a clinical perspective, it has also ignored an important aspect of the anger experience.

Seven or eight years ago when I initially decided to undertake study in the area of anger I was most interested in

anger expressed by oppressed groups in the context of movements for change--the women's liberation and civil rights movements. After my library search yielded nothing related to this particular perspective on anger, in the interest of getting, published I embarked upon a more traditional research program.

But the failure of social scientists to recognize the anger of disenfranchised groups in the context of social movements has serious ramifications. If anger is viewed as a problem within the individual then it becomes the domain of clinical psychology. Clinical psychologists can bring the available research to bear in efforts to control this "personal" problem.

The experience of anger and societal reactions to it has special significance for disenfranchised persons. Jean Baker Miller (1985) explains that any subordinate is in a position that constantly generates anger. When the traditional Freudian model is applied to analyze this anger, the culturally generated anger comes to be viewed as an inherently dangerous drive, one which should be controlled and suppressed. In fact, emotional displays of anger are discomfiting to observers and recipients (Baldwin-Bonney & Biaggio, 1983). The typical reaction of observers or recipients is often an attempt at diffusing or deflecting the anger. This reaction can constitute an invalidation of the person's anger and a failure to recognize or accept the reasons for it. I encountered a particularly insidious instance of this in the classroom recently. In explaining how radical and angry responses to social injustice may have adverse consequences, one student wrote:

> Witness the violent uprisings in our own country as oppressed blacks behaved in a radical manner to achieve their goals. Though American blacks did indeed achieve many of their goals, the bitterness and hatred on the part of many whites lingers, exacerbated in part by the radical behavior of the blacks.

This individual is blaming the bitterness and hatred that whites feel toward blacks on the ostensible "radical" behavior of blacks. In other words, this logic represents an attempt to diffuse or deflect the anger of blacks; they should not be angry because that only makes white people bitter toward them. This line of reasoning ignores the reasons for the black anger, that is, their response to discrimination and prejudice. Obviously, the bitterness and hatred that many whites feel is not the result of black attempts to overcome oppression, but the cause of it. Thus, by means of the logic presented above, the blame for black anger over discrimination is shifted from the oppressor to the oppressed. Blacks who are angry are the ones with the "problem."

Conclusions

Traditional approaches have ignored some important questions or perspectives about anger: the phenomenology of the anger experience; the social context of anger; and anger expression as an instrument for social change. For disenfranchised individu-

als and groups this perspective has translated into a denial of the anger experience. This invalidation of anger can be viewed as a pervasive means of social control in that there is no attempt to consider the social context in which anger arises. The philosophy apparent in this latter perspective derives from a feminist analysis, an analysis that does not restrict itself to an empirical epistemology but allows for an intuitional epistemology, an analysis that goes beyond a reductionistic viewpoint and considers more encompassing variables. An important contribution of this analysis is an examination of the broader social context in which anger arises and the validation of the anger experience as a sometimes justifiable response to social-political conditions.

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